

The Quick And Easy Way To Hold A GA Using Nothing More Than A Wiki And Email.

OR “How To Avoid The Shambles That Is A Typical PPI GA”

Introduction

For a movement that is based on technology, innovation, and transparency, the event has become a ritualistic farce more suited to the parodist's art, than that of the competent organiser.

The problem is that in setting up the event, an overlarge importance has been placed on physicality and immediacy, rather than on competence, feasibility, and quality. In addition, the required work of the event (that of electing officers, and passing statute amendments) has become subservient to the trivial, unrelated and disconnected 'open space conference' idea. With the development of the 'think twice' meet-up, it is clear there is no further use for these activities within the larger PPI conference. Especially since the reality of these open space events isn't to promulgate new ideas, or foster debate on a topic, but for certain select people to control discussion on topics.

Accordingly, the entire thought process behind the event needs to be reworked from first principles.

While the statutes call for votes, at no point is there any such requirement that votes be held in physical proximity, and that digital/electronic voting is not permitted. In addition it was shown at Kazan that the ability of member parties to vote is dependent entirely on the whim of certain personages at the event, and should they so decide, or have any grounds to potentially justify denial of voting, they have categorically prohibited voting for that member-group to take place.

Example

In Kazan, the meeting chair got an unverified claim that the dutch lead delegate was no longer considered to represent the Dutch group, and no alternate lead was offered. The Dutch contingency was thus stripped of any voting/representation or say in the General Assembly, even if the claim was later found to be invalid. In best practices, a provisional ballot should have been allowed, where it was tallied but not considered final unless/until the situation had been clarified. If an alternate representative had been proposed, they too could have been issued a provisional vote. In case where they were in accord, it would not have mattered. In a vote with a large margin of victory, it also would not matter, and for instances where the differences in vote materially affect the outcome, a day or two's pause while the credentials are sorted does not harm anything.

These issues are caused by what is known as “fixation error” (for examples in other fields, see this article <http://www.newstatesman.com/2014/05/how-mistakes-can-save-lives>)

To stop that, we need to step back and work again from first principles, and that's what I have done here.

Underlying Principle.

If we abandon the notion that GA's have to be immediate, in-person events, we get a much wider range of options. While some may then embrace the idea of an online one, the question then tends to devolve into "what software package to use?" This is the absolute wrong question to ask.

In asking it, you again end up attempting to add complexity, and a 'pre-made solution' which may seem to be quicker. However, none of this is mission-critical AND immediate, which means more traditional, reliable, and simple methods can be employed.

The problem with any highly technical system is that it requires a complex piece of software to both be reliable, and trustworthy, while also being sufficiently tested to ensure this. It also indicates a backwards thought process, in that you have picked the method and then try and fix the method to it. Instead, we should create procedures based around the actions.

To this end, the process I have devised requires only two pieces of software – Email, and a Wiki. Both are well tested, and reliable pieces of software, and have both security and audit capabilities. In the case of the wiki, audit trails are inbuilt (and having a dedicated wiki may prove to be most beneficial), while emails have the OpenPGP system for digital signing of emails.

The election administrators have access to the wiki, and can monitor, correct vandalism etc. as needed. The usage of the wiki is as the one-to-many medium. The use of email is as a one-to-one method (specifically voting)

In addition, this use of public-facing wiki, and spread time allow for discussion and debate on the topic in a public forum. It also then allows for informed consent by the voting representative to ensure the votes represent the wishes of the party/member, and not the elector.

Overview

By removing immediacy, we can stretch the event over a period of days if not weeks) allowing for better international response.

Several procedures are used to ensure a fairer and more 'competitive' General assembly. This includes periods of discussion, including a time period where proposals are debatable in their final, unfixed form. Secret voting, with post-election disclosure allows for accountability and transparency, but reduces the tactical aspect by reducing the consideration of other votes.

Sample Timeline

A sample timeline would look like this, starting from a theorised 'start time' of "0".

- T-3 weeks (or more)
 - an international administration team for the election is chosen. This should be representative of regions at the very least, without undue concentration in any one geographical area (and absolutely no more than one per country)
 - Said team contacts the relevant parties to obtain details of the voting representatives, and arrange test messages.
- T-2weeks:
 - Open submissions for positions, memberships, amendments, and anything else to be voted on. These can be submitted via email to the election administrators, or posted by their proposer directly to the wiki.
 - At this time, discussion can also open (via the associated talk page(s) for the proposals) but only the submitting entity can modify the proposal.
 - In addition, at this point, conflicting proposals should be identified and groups (and cross-linked). Likewise competitors for the same elections should be similarly grouped, as has been the case previously.
- T=0
 - The ability to add new proposals, membership petitions, or nominate for elected positions is finished.
 - The ability to debate, discuss and modify continues.
 - Identification to the election team of the email account should be completed, along with test messages. Test messages confirming the identity of the elector sending the message and their representing party should be published, as a public check of identity. Any member not having completed this will be deemed to not take part for the purposes of Quorum.
 - The list of electors should be published, along with the entity they represent.
- T+3 days
 - The ability to modify proposals/petitions/nominations ends
 - The ability to debate continues
 - At this point, the Ballot should be drawn up
- T+1 week
 - Voting Opens. Votes should be sent, digitally signed (preferably using in-line OpenPGP) to an address set up specifically to receive votes.
 - These votes are NOT to be published at the time of receipt, and should be kept confidential at that time.
 - A vote confirmation is sent back to the party representative (signed) to indicate that the vote has been received, and that it has been received accurately.
 - Votes may be sent for the entire ballot as one, or per-section, or per-vote.
 - Votes may be changed, by specifically and explicitly referencing the prior mail is to be considered invalid and casting new ones. However,

the entire preceding email vote referenced will be invalidated, and new votes will need to be cast.

Example A vote for the two co-chairs, 5 board members and the lay auditor is sent in. The member then changes their mind on their vote of chair. The entire email would be invalidated, and new votes cast.

However, a previous email vote containing votes on new member parties would be unaffected.

- T+10 days
 - Voting closes.
 - Votes are tallied
- T+11 days
 - Vote results are published.
 - Voting emails are published on the wiki, including PGP signature, to ensure accuracy of vote. This includes vote emails that were later marked invalid by the caster, suitably marked (in red text perhaps)
 - For the purposes of timing, all votes are considered to have 'occurred' at this time, simultaneously.

Rationals

There are a number of specifics here that may need explanation.

With the identified vote system and the question of immediacy discarded, the question of 'valid representative' is not serious. If a question of legitimacy of the voting member's representative comes up, then said vote can be made provisional, until it's cleared up, and if needed, an alternate provisional vote issued for the competing claim. Such claims should also be clearly documented and presented, along with the determination of the validity of the claim. The aim is transparency.

The reasoning behind the delay between votes being made and being published is the same as behind the delay in publishing results from the EU elections until all polls close. It is an attempt to prevent tactical considerations in voting, and ensuring that votes are cast on the merits.

The proposal timeframe is split into three periods, proposals can be made or modified, proposals can be modified, proposals are fixed. The first period allows for proposals to be modified or counter-proposals made based on the discussion about it. The second period allows for existing proposals to be modified based on feedback, while giving a final list of proposals. The final period ensures that any further discussion is about the final version, so that a fixed proposal can be communicated to members, and the vote can be fully informed.

Email votes and corrections. The idea behind invalidating the entire email, rather than specific votes in said email, is that it makes it extremely clear that all votes in it are to be replaced, and there is no question of 'I meant that vote, not that one'.

By making all votes effective simultaneously is to eliminate the question of 'order'. In the past, certain votes have been held in a certain order, so that they can come into

effect before others. As such, the scheduling of the votes has sometimes been the biggest influence of all on the outcome of the votes.

Timelines. While the timeline illustrated above is representative, it is not a hard+fast timeline. I gave a 3 day voting period so as not to string it out unduly, but it could be taken to a week. In addition, while deadlines for each section should be given in multiple regional time zones and UTC (the primary), it may be acceptable to allow a little 'injury time' (typically an hour or two) to account for last-minute issues in sending. Also any submissions sent directly to email, and then added to the wiki by the election administrators should be emailed before the deadline, and added ASAP, with the email time and source clearly marked.

'Leaking the votes'. Leaking the votes ahead of the publication (certainly before the close of votes) should be considered an extremely serious offense, as an attempt to corrupt or otherwise influence the vote. Likewise voting parties should at least refrain from publically announcing their votes where possible. Due to party membership involvement, the votes may be known by any person wishing to dig (much like a house displaying a certain candidates sign is expected to vote that way), but confirmation of that should be strongly discouraged.

While in many ways this seems like it may be a lot of work, most of it is the same work done at an in-person event, except done digitally.

More importantly, it allows for debate, equal participation no matter where you are, and a fixed, clear set of ballot questions, which then has a fixed, clear vote, cast (notionally) privately, but then publically revealed afterwards, both so the vote count can be verified, and to expose a faithless elector. However, votes should not be changed after publication for reasons of a faithless elector. They may only be changed if the chain of evidence of the votes shows they were cast before the deadline, but incorrectly tabulated or recorded.

Debate. While debate on the wiki is encouraged, it should not be considered to ONLY exist there, and users are perfectly welcome to use email lists, IRC, mumble, in person meetings, or any other means to do so. An option may be for a public meeting (held on IRC or mumble for instance) during the debate period, where proposers can attempt to "sell" their proposals, or ask/answer questions of others.

OPTIONAL VARIANT

Instead of using the wiki talk pages for debate/discussion, a forum could be set up instead. As a bonus it has a 'quote' ability that makes it easier to follow conversations, with a thread per-proposal, and a way to track 'read' v 'unread' comments, plus multiple simultaneous posters are not an issue.. Its drawback though is that the activity log is not publically available as the history of a wikipage is, thus it's easier to 'disappear' comments.

Conclusion

This is a voting system that trades technological complexity and software frippery, for a little time and manpower. The wiki system ensures open debate through providing a means to see the proposals, and provide an area to discuss them. The email-

based votes allow for votes to be cast at any time, with a cryptographic verification, using software we're all familiar with, is platform agnostic, and is readily scalable.

The only drawbacks are that it can be a lot of work for the election team, but that is true of an in-person event) and that a team must be capable of working together (although not too well, as that can lead to collusion and the possibility of undermining the votes) and the extended timeframe means that it's something that will take some time from start to finish, and not be 'over with in a day or two', but during that time it does not require more than occasional attention.

I hope that you have found this proposal enlightening, and give it the consideration it deserves

Andrew Norton
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